

Brexit is now in the hands of only those who show up

By John Clancy, Visiting Professor at the Centre for Brexit Studies, former Leader of Birmingham City Council and Labour Councillor for Quinton.

Democratic power rests in the slot of a ballot box. And in its sealing and unsealing and opening. And in its contents pouring onto a table. And then in that riot of papers being counted, face up, into bundles of 25 and then into 100s and then 500s and 1000s and their remainders.

Eagle-eyed Party Ballot watchers sample, a couple of feet only from across the counting table, how many of their party's crosses reside in each set of 25 face-up ballots as they are counted. As that physical ballot box comes from a very specific set of households in an area, those with the 'tally sheets' can calculate from that sample a very strong estimate of where their vote actually lives; or does not. It's allowed. It's a by-product of the transparency required of a democratic count.

Once the number of ballots on the table matches the stated number of ballots on the outside of the box, the great separation into party piles begins.

After that the bundling begins again, this time with elastic bands into 25s, 100s, 500s and 1000s. And their remainders. And the checking and agreeing between officials and candidates and agents of the validity or not of spoilt, or doubtfully expressed marks on, ballot papers is the penultimate stage before the announcement of the result.

As you stand and observe and participate – and it is crucial to democratic legitimacy that we do so – the frisson of excitement is palpably felt, whether you're a candidate or not. It's a real, physical, democratic experience.

Long after the election papers get stored away in case of future challenge, the local council publishes the last document in the exercise. And in some ways it's the most important: ***the marked***

register. It tells those who inspect it who actually voted – and, as importantly, who actually didn't.

Ordinary folk not steeped in electoral party politics are often shocked by this. The secrecy of the ballot means the whole thing is private, surely?, they say.

Well, it's not.

If you didn't vote, the politicians know who you are, and they know where you live. And they may also have your phone number, once linked up with that information. This is all legal, and acceptable and regarded as part of the U.K. democratic process.

And, for politicians and their election machines, the beauty of the marked register is that if you have kept a record of each of them for every household for decades you have a sophisticated profile of the likelihood or not any elector voting.

Are you just a General Election voter only? Have you missed one?

Do you have a 100% attendance record across all local, mayoral, Euro, Police and Crime Commissioner, by-elections, and referendums? Or are you a democratic slacker?

Politicians know.

And the marked register rarely lies. So when someone from a political party knocks on your door or phones you up, or sends you an email, they are likely to know a lot more about you than you might think. The leaflet or letter sent to you which you might think is received by everyone locally, is as likely to be different, depending on what they know about you – and your tendencies to vote or not.

And if you have a 0% record of voting you are unlikely to receive a knock on the door, or a telephone call or any communication because from the politician's point of view, you're simply not worth it. Unless you're a new voter. Then they **really** want to speak to you!

Ironically, if you have a 100% record of voting you are, equally, far less valuable to a political caller. Especially if they have a record of

who you're likely to support. You can be relied upon without much prompting.

The real gold dust is that class of your identified supporters who do not have a great record of actually voting.

Winning elections is not about getting voters to support you: it's about getting your supporters actually to come out to vote. If they stay at home, they're useless.

And that's the point: a December 12th election, less than two weeks before Christmas is a disaster for electoral campaign organisers of all parties.

It is, without doubt, the most reckless act of any Prime Minister in setting an election in modern times. It is an utterly ridiculous, uncalculated risk.

Teresa May's calculated, politically completely appropriate and apparently non-risky decision to call the last General Election is obviously the converse, I accept. But her decision wasn't ridiculous. And the reasons for losing her majority were otherwise than setting the actual date. It might be for Boris (in his case, a minority to lose).

If it was in January or February it would be bad. But to try to drag out to the polling station folk who really have enough other things to do and in the middle of often extra hours of working, and the general busy-ness of Christmas makes the job of party campaigners massively more difficult.

When I first stood formally for elected public political office, as a councillor, it was in 2002 in Hodge Hill ward in Birmingham. I'd fought many elections as a campaign organiser at elections across the board prior to that. But this was the real deal. I was putting myself on the line.

I won. I overturned a Tory majority, and gained the seat for the Labour Party.

Hodge Hill Ward

John Michael CLANCY (Labour)	1,172	42.5%
Stuart James MacGregor CLARKSON (Conservative)	1,044	37.9%
Peter Frank JOHNSON (UKIP)	255	9.2%
Julia Carol JONES (Liberal Democrat)	287	10.4%

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LABOUR GAIN FROM CONSERVATIVE

I was obviously delighted to receive 42.5% of the vote and a swing to Labour from the Tories of 14.4%. The people had spoken. I stood tall with real democratic legitimacy.

It is there in black and white.

What is not is the date of the by-election: 28th February.

It really **was** in the bleak mid-winter.

And the other omission is the turnout: 15%.

Yes: Fifteen per cent. Winter elections, eh?

So my democratic legitimacy actually amounted to not very much of the electorate at all. 6% of the good burghers of Hodge Hill placed a cross next to my name.

In 1996, there was a January 11th by-election in the same ward – the turnout was little more than 12%.

Now council by-elections are clearly not a guide to turnout in general elections. But the point is that it was a total winter nightmare for the most experienced of political campaigners just getting the electorate

to do its job and turn up when it was dark and cold and miserable. And Christmas was long gone in both cases.

I see as yet no real evidence in this election that a massive Postal Vote drive to counter the inevitable December 12th inertia has occurred yet.

YouGov [\[1\]](#) estimated at the last election that for every 10 years older a voter is, their chance of voting Tory increases by around nine points and the chance of them voting Labour decreases by nine points. Almost 70% of over-70s voted Conservative, 58% of those in their 60s voted Tory. Nevertheless, 84% of over 70s actually voted. And they still didn't win a majority.

So how a December 12th election impacts on that demographic tendency to vote is a huge gamble by this Prime Minister.

He has to hope older voters vote early. And whether the weather is fine will be a huge aspect of that. The problem is, 'car calls' are usually an answer (picking up the voter and taking them to and from the polling station) but are hopelessly wasteful of campaigners' time.

I think we can say, at least, that the 68% turnout at the 2017 election is hardly likely to be repeated. I'd be delighted if it was. But I think it's possible we'll fall well below 60% and that consequently makes calling this election very difficult indeed. And it would have been anyway even if in the middle of a heatwave in June.

People may need a real reason to turn up. Defending or defeating Brexit may be that reason. Perhaps the former is what Boris is counting on. Perhaps offering a 5% pay rise to over 5 Million public sector workers and compensation to 4 million WASPI women pensioners is a calculated turn-up incentive from Labour, beyond just the principle of the policies.

Added to the extreme unlikelihood that (as happened at the last election) 82.4% of the vote goes to just Labour and Conservative, you have a recipe for electoral prediction chaos.

This election could be too close to call or a walkover for someone.

What will be really difficult to achieve, and the stuff of real campaigners' nightmares, is persuading the walkover to the polling station in the cold and wet, and possibly snowy, and probably icy winter evening.

Brexit will, indeed, be all about the walkover.

[1] <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2017/06/13/how-britain-voted-2017-general-election>